

and beyond the reach of its increasingly bellicose neighbors in Thailand. What is unclear is whether this retreat took place with the great pomp and ceremony described by certain chroniclers, or whether the king and his court fled in disarray before the advances of a Thai army. One thing is certain: Angkor was plundered and devastated and, except perhaps for a very short period during the 16th century, was never again to house the capital of Cambodia, which was eventually established at Phnom Penh.

#### The Thais in Angkor

A late Cambodian chronicle (there are in fact no early ones) gives a polite account of the conqueror's exploits in Angkor, describing the Thai king questioning the "Khmer mandarins" about the origin, history, and purpose of the various monuments he encounters. Having set up a guard to protect the city, "He removed the august statues of the Buddha made of gold, silver, bronze, and precious stones, as well as a number of statues of the August Bull and of other animals." He also invited the monks to follow him and, for good measure, deported to Thailand sixty thousand families from the conquered capital.

By transporting Angkor's statues to his own capital the Thai king was not setting a precedent for Napoleon Bonaparte pillaging Europe to enrich the Louvre: It was not beauty he was removing, but the power of the kings of Angkor as contained in these divine images. A hundred years later the Burmese were shrewd enough to do the same:

**B**elow left: Three-headed elephant dating from the 12th or 13th century. Like the other statues now in Mandalay, plundered by the Thais and then by the Burmese, it probably came from Neak Pean, Chou Ta-kuan's "island in the Northern Lake" at Angkor.

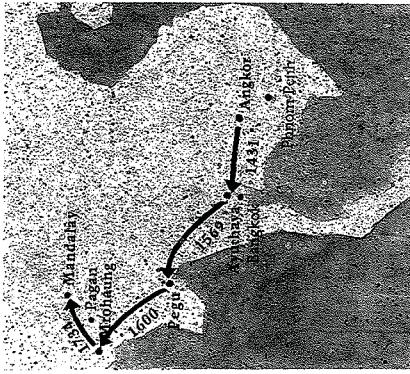
capital, and in their turn removed a number of the Angkor statues. Finally in 1734 these statues arrived in Mandalay, where they have remained ever since.

#### Around the Middle of the 16th Century the King of Cambodia, Hunting for Elephants in the North of the Country, Discovered a Vast Abandoned City Overgrown by Tropical Forest

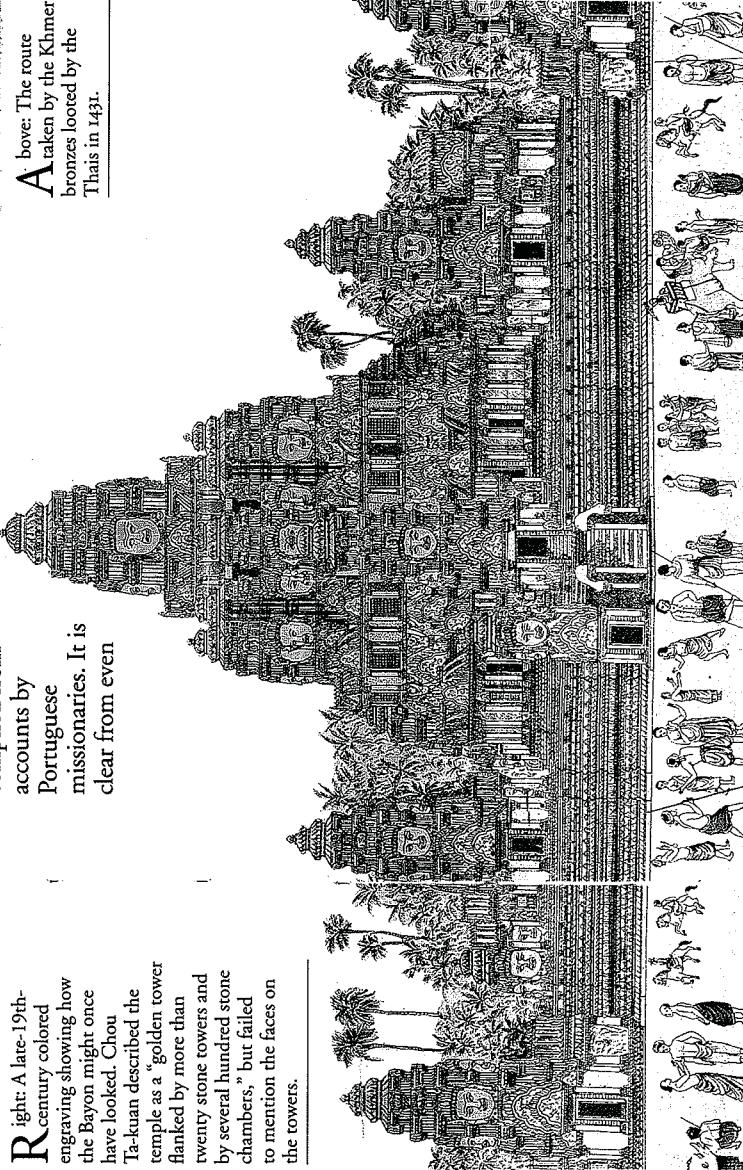
The king had the site cleared and installed his court there. News of this event was spread in Europe at the beginning of the 17th century through publications compiled from accounts by Portuguese

missionaries. It is clear from even

**R**ight: A late-19th-century colored engraving showing how the Bayon might once have looked. Chou Ta-kuan described the temple as "a golden tower flanked by more than twenty stone towers and by several hundred stone chambers," but failed to mention the faces on the towers.



**A**bove: The route taken by the Khmer bronzes looted by the Thais in 1431.



## 64 THE LAST OF THE EXPLORERS

**A New Lord Elgin En Route to Tonkin**

During his time in Cambodia as a member of the Mekong Exploration Commission, Louis Delaporte (1842–1925) became a great admirer of Doudart de Lagrée, whose memory he staunchly defended, and Khmer art, to which he was to devote the rest of his life.

When he was put in charge of an exploratory mission to Tonkin, Delaporte

obtained authorization to begin

the expedition in Cambodia—and in fact he never left. The specific objective of the mission was something new: to visit monuments with a view to bringing statues and other sculptures back to France, thereby assembling the first official collection of Khmer art. Delaporte went further than that, continuing Doudart de Lagrée's initiatives and visiting sites his predecessor had described or mentioned in passing. Delaporte had a large team at his disposal and they collected statues, drew up plans (Laeiderich had joined this expedition too), copied reconstructions. At the Great Preah Khan he found abundant

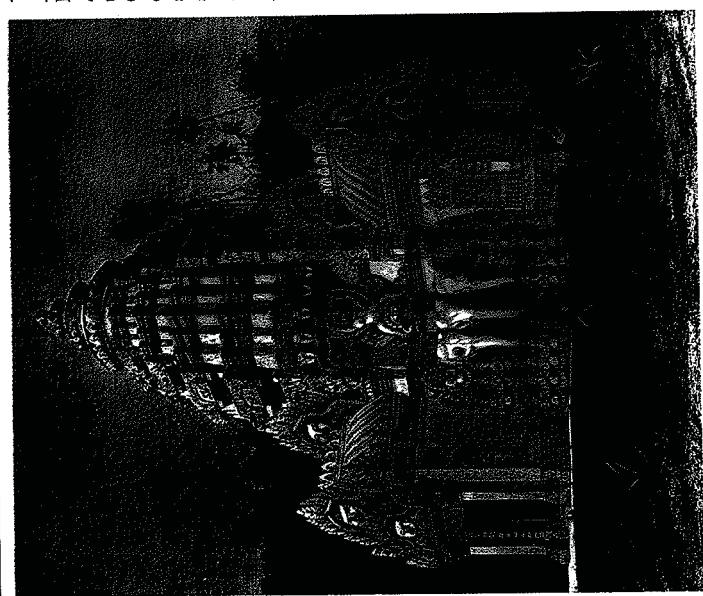


**A**bove: A member of the Delaporte mission. Louis Delaporte, the mainspring of the Universal Exposition in Paris, had traveled to Mexico and Iceland before being selected for the Doudart de Lagrée expedition for his cartographic and drawing skills. Director of the Indochinese Museum until his death in 1925, he was passionate about Khmer art, but also conscious of his limitations, saying to George Coedès in 1909: "I am only half a curator. I have only focused on art. Others will do the rest!"

Left: Sculptures from

the Preah Khan at Angkor at the Universal Exposition in Paris, 1878. Here the general public had its first real exposure to Khmer art.

## IN DOUDART DE LAGREE'S FOOTSTEPS 65



**R**econstruction of the Preah Ko, from Louis Delaporte's *Voyage au Cambodge*, 1880. This temple is part of the Great Preah Khan complex, situated about sixty miles east of Angkor and dating for the most part from the 10th and 13th centuries, like Angkor Wat and the Bayon. Like Neak Pean, it is built in the center of a *bomay*. The animals and human figures piled up at the corners symbolize the different levels of the universe, from the underworld of the *nagas*, or serpents, trampled by elephants, to the celestial world represented by the wild geese with wings spread wide. Delaporte was the first to draw attention to this remarkable monument. Though clumsy, his view captures the building's principal features, despite its ruinous condition.

**O**verleaf: Statue being transported across the Great Preah Khan swampland—almost certainly the "giant leaning on a club" removed from Preah Ko (left). Clearing the temple of Preah Stung in the Great Preah Khan area (right). The face-tower, resembling those of the Bayon, is a rare find outside Angkor. From Delaporte's *Voyage*, 1880.



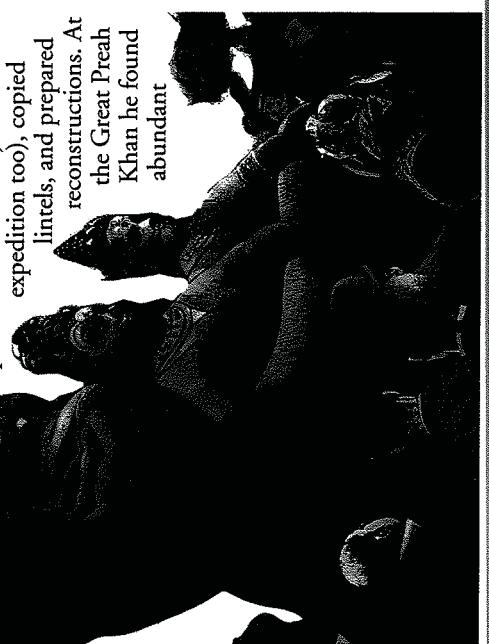
**A**t the Delaporte mission. Louis Delaporte, the mainspring of the Universal Exposition in Paris, had traveled to Mexico and Iceland before being selected for the Doudart de Lagrée expedition for his cartographic and drawing skills. Director of the Indochinese Museum until his death in 1925, he was passionate about Khmer art, but also conscious of his limitations, saying to George Coedès in 1909: "I am only half a curator. I have only focused on art. Others will do the rest!"

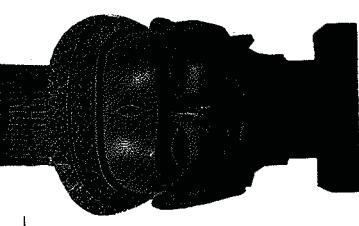
Left: Sculptures from

the Preah Khan at Angkor at the Universal Exposition in Paris, 1878. Here the general public had its first real exposure to Khmer art.

**Angkor in the Museums**

Delaporte returned to France with "some seventy pieces of sculpture and architecture" that he claimed to have bought, or rather, traded for. He had gone out to Cambodia with a collection of goods including "a





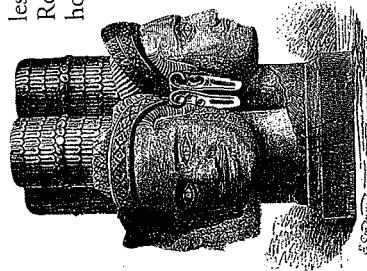
**D**elaporte was anxious to build up the collections of the Indo-Chinese Museum (now all in the Guimet Museum in Paris). This sandstone statue of Brahma (opposite below, found a few miles from the temple of Wat Baser in the Battambang region, where Bouillevaux and Mouhot first encountered Khmer art, was presented to the Indo-Chinese Museum in 1888. Delaporte himself brought back the heads of Shiva (above) and Brahma (left) from a temple situated on the Phnom Bok northeast of Angkor. The frieze of dancers (opposite above) is from Angkor Wat. When the Cambodian royal dancers visited France in 1906 the public could see just how little Cambodia's artistic traditions had changed.

number of statues, paintings, and engravings to present to the king and to the mandarins." He made a point of offering some of these goods to King Norodom, explaining with great diplomacy that "our government requested his permission to remove from his States certain artistic treasures to which we attach value and sent him in exchange a number of objects of artistic value from France."

Delaporte's sculptures did not go to the Louvre in Paris, as he had hoped, but were exiled to the château of Compiegne, a former imperial residence for which the Republic had no real use. A few items were transferred to the Trocadéro in Paris for the Universal Exposition of 1878, and there two years later Khmer art acquired a home in the new Indo-Chinese Museum.

#### Souvenirs from Cambodia

Cambodia's visitors were not all official: The ancient sites also attracted administrators taking a holiday, sailors on leave, and even the more enlightened type of tourist. Angkor and the Great Preah Khan were not obvious choices, since one was in Thailand and the other was relatively inaccessible, and the majority of tourists tended to visit southern Cambodia and Cochinchina instead. These visits produced a rich crop of souvenirs: sometimes entire statues, more often heads or small bronzes that were easier to transport. Back in France some of these items ended up in the large museums—the Trocadéro or the Guimet—or in lesser-known ones like that at Rochefort. A number remained, however, in private homes. While hidden from the view of the general public, they heralded a time when Khmer art would come into its own, offering a passionate focus of interest to collectors and antiquarians.



**A**ngkor at the Salon  
Delaporte's drawings opened up a whole new world to

Bruno Dagens was born in the Netherlands and brought up in North Africa and Strasbourg, France. A former member of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, he was introduced to archaeology by Daniel Schlumberger in Afghanistan.

In 1965 he went to Cambodia and worked for the Angkor Conservation Service for seven years, studying temple iconography, organizing and restoring the sculptures in the depot at Angkor, and investigating the region's mineral deposits. He also translated a Sanskrit treatise on architecture, drawing on his knowledge of the Angkor temples. After a period teaching at Louvain, Belgium, he spent nine years in Pondicherry in southern India studying Shaivite texts and a group of temples located on the site of a future dam. In 1985 and 1994 he returned briefly to Angkor. Dagens is currently teaching at the University of Paris-III, carrying out research in Thailand, and coordinating on behalf of UNESCO a project to conserve the Wat Phu temple in Laos.

*To Cathy and Nicolas  
in memory of their friends at Phnom Trean*

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